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A Green Beret hero gets caught in a mysterious net

By Bill Curry
Los Angeles Times Service

TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES, N.M. — Eugene Aloys Tafoya was well known around town — so well known that when he disappeared for long periods of time, people noticed. One close friend even thought Tafoya, a retired Green Beret and Vietnam War hero, must be working undercover for the government. "Some kind of spook," the friend said.

There was, after all, Tafoya's frequent and unexplained international travel. That seemed out of place for a retired, enlisted man who had once asked a neighbor for help in finding work. And there was his money — in particular the wad he took into Rocky's bar the night he set fire to a \$20 bill.

"He told people the trips were for the government," said Truth or Consequences police officer Robert Simon. "He didn't say which government."

But by the time Simon and other investigators finished searching Tafoya's home here on April 22, there was strong evidence that Tafoya was indeed working for the government — the Libyan government.

Specifically, investigators now say in court affidavits, Tafoya, 45, "is suspected of being a mercenary soldier who is available to be hired and paid to kill human beings." He is charged — to the astonishment of this community — with being a hit man hired to gun down a Libyan student in Fort Collins, Colo., last October because the student was an outspoken opponent of Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy.

Last month, the Reagan administration ordered the closing of the Libyan Embassy in Washington on the ground that it was a scene of "unacceptable conduct." In May 1980,

President Jimmy Carter had expelled four Libyan diplomats from the embassy, accusing them of being "would-be assassins."

But, according to investigators, it was Tafoya who actually brought Khadafy's international terrorist campaign to the streets of America.

Among the items seized from Tafoya's home were what appears to be a hand-drawn plan of the victim's apartment; telephone bills showing calls to Libya and England; a Kuwaiti driver's license and Libyan money and propaganda. There was an Arabic phrase book and two Tafoya passports showing repeated trips to Libya, Malta and England, where Afoya arrived one time within 70 hours of the Fort Collins shooting. There was a checking account deposit for \$8,623.26 and evidence of a Swiss bank account. And there were copies of Soldier of Fortune magazine and tape recordings. "He recorded all his telephone calls," said Simon. "Everything."

The Boston Globe has reported that papers found in Tafoya's house contain references to a former CIA-employee accused of assisting Libyan terrorism. That employee and another former CIA employee have been indicted by a federal grand jury on charges that they conspired to sell Libya arms for terrorist training, to recruit U.S. citizens, including ex-Green berets, to build explosives in Libya and to solicit a U.S. citizen to assassinate a Libyan exile for \$1 million.

Investigators also have a trail of motel and car rental receipts placing Tafoya and another person in the Fort Collins area last Oct. 14, the day Faisal Abdulazez Zagallai was shot twice in the head and seriously wounded.

Tafoya is now awaiting trial in Fort Collins on charges of conspiracy and attempted first-degree murder.

Libya's target

Faisal Zagallai, 35, and his wife, Farida, had come to the United States on Jan. 13, 1971, just 15 days after their marriage in Libya; they were student achievers and were sent to Louisiana State University on Libyan government scholarships. Later that year, they transferred to Colorado State University in Fort Collins, 60 miles north of Denver, where Faisal is now finishing his doctoral degree in sociology.

As the Khadafy regime took hold, so did Zagallai's opposition to it. In 1973, all Libyan students overseas were summoned home for a testing of their political beliefs, Zagallai said. Students were also among the victims of a mass public hanging in Libya.

By 1976, Zagallai was in the thick of a student dissident movement in the United States, including a 24-hour takeover of the Libyan Embassy in Washington.

In early 1980, shortly after the Libyan government called for "physical liquidation of anti-revolutionary people," Zagallai was warned by the FBI that his name was on an anti-Khadafy hit list. The warning came at a time of murders and attempted killings of Libyan exiles in England, Italy, Greece and elsewhere.

Time to get armed

So Zagallai obtained a permit from Fort Collins police to carry a gun, an automatic pistol, which he said in a soft, measured voice during an interview, is "the first thing on in the morning, the last thing off at night."

According to police, the hunt began closing in on Zagallai last Oct. 9. Receipts indicate that Tafoya checked into a Fort Collins Holiday Inn and had a rental car delivered to him the next day. He checked out on Oct. 11, but did not return the rental car until Oct. 12.

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